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A Survey of Materialism in Thought and Communication

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Summary and Keywords

Materialism emerged as the beginning of philosophical (as opposed to mystical or religious) thought in ancient India and Greece around the 6th century BCE and has from the beginning been associated with the investigation of the world in its complexity beyond the relatively immediate appearance of phenomena to human sense and thought. The thinkers whose concepts inform contemporary materialist approaches to critical communication studies can be traced through historical developments of materialist thoughts in antiquity, the premodern and modern eras, and leading up to the present day. Familiar, emerging, and potential discussions of the nature and formation of consciousness in natural and social life inform the critical study of communication, particularly rhetoric. Particular attention is paid to the relation of materialism and varieties of Marxist and post-Marxist thought, and these are situated within debates in the field of critical communication studies, particularly rhetoric. Concepts originating from the early-20th-century USSR, associated with “creative” Soviet philosophy and activity theory, are less familiar (to this field) but are pertinent to the area of materialist thought. While this area of philosophy has not yet developed deeply or been promulgated widely in communication studies, it is suited to participate in the current conversation about materialism in communication, consciousness, and practice. Its chief contribution is a treatment of the ideal in materialism that resists both reduction and dualism. It also brings to the fore important questions about the place of human activity, including thought, in the material world.

Keywords: materialism, Marxism, new materialism, structuralism, poststructuralism, philosophy, rhetoric, activity theory, communication and critical studies

Introduction

Materialism is a philosophical perspective according to which all that occurs or exists has its origin and cause in matter and its transformations. While definitions of matter have varied over historical periods, its nature as the common substrate of the universe is typically not in dispute among materialists. Other key commitments follow from this perspective, including the nonexistence of mind or thought except through the development of matter, the independent existence of matter and nature external to or independent of mind or thought, and the exclusion of immaterial entities (such as souls, deities, ideas, or magic) construed to infuse matter or direct its movement or transformation (Novack, 1965). Thus the strictest materialist perspective is philosophically monist and excludes ontological dualism of any kind between mind and matter or independence of the former from the latter. However, much work over the course of the development of materialist thought has been influenced by its contrary perspective, idealism, and characterized by limitations in humans' ability to observe, describe, and think of matter as distinct from thought and its processes, which confounds attempts at boundary work. Philosopher Lee (2016) describes this difficulty in defining both matter and materialism, saying that "materialism is necessarily caught between what is given (and that will always be material) and its mode of being given (and that is never graspable except by thought)" such that matter always has a twofold existence as independent of/other than thought and only understandable in thought (p. 88).

Materialism emerged as the beginning of philosophical (as opposed to mystical or religious) thought in ancient India and Greece around the 6th century BCE. Through much of the common era it was officially disfavored, and religious and philosophical idealism dominated until the early modern period. At that time, materialism began a resurgence that continued and developed into modernity.

As a philosophical perspective materialism contains descriptions of reality, consciousness, human knowledge, and behavior and thus belongs to both ontology and epistemology as extended into politics, ethics, psychology, and beyond. Most importantly, a materialist perspective entails a standpoint in relation to causality in the natural and social world, of why things exist or events happen as they do, and it is often on the question of causality that materialists differ not only with idealists but also with other materialists. These differences are influenced in no small part by differences in theorists' definitions or descriptions of matter, for example as substance extended in space, persistent over time, and perceptible to the senses or the particle/wave complex of quantum physics, as inert/passive or dynamic/active, as subject to external cause or self-causing, as transforming mechanically or indeterminately.

This article charts selected debates over the matter and utility of a materialist perspective, particularly as these are important for the critical study of communication.¹ It contains a brief historical survey of materialist thought from its origins in antiquity until the mid-19th century, followed by a discussion of materialism as theorized by Marx

and Engels. Its chief focus subsequently is on debates emerging against and within Marxist materialism, including and concluding with those emerging from what is broadly construed as the poststructuralist turn in philosophy and critical communication studies.

Materialism Before Marxism

Prior to the mid-19th century, materialist thought can be described as changing importantly across three broad historical periods: antiquity to the common era, the medieval and premodern period, and the modern period including the early Enlightenment.² In each period, the materialist perspective is closely related to and often limited by prevailing scientific knowledge and characterized by a more or less explicit opposition to idealism in religious doctrine and philosophical thought.

Antiquity

While observation, explanation, and prediction of worldly phenomena had been part of the development of the human species long before antiquity, certain factors appear to have facilitated the systematic investigation and of and reflection upon the world characteristic of both philosophy and science in different parts of the world around the 6th century BCE. These include social and economic developments such as class stratification and social division of labor, urbanization, the development of trade, and the accumulation of sufficient social wealth for some members of society to be free from having to labor manually or for others to earn a living such that they could devote their time to investigating and contemplating the world. The development of trade in particular required observing, measuring, evaluating, recording, and predicting natural phenomena. Some materialist scholars associate the beginnings of materialism specifically with the development of a merchant class (in Greece) or of merchant interests (in India) independent of and against agricultural aristocracy and religious authority. They thus perceive the opposition between materialist and idealist perspectives not to be merely a clash of ideas but contrary theories of natural and social reality informed by and emerging from clashes within social life itself.

Ancient Greek materialism began with the Ionian School (including Thales, Anaximander, Anaximenes, and Hecateus) of the 6th and 5th centuries BCE and included the Atomists (such as Democritus and Heraclitus), the Sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias, Isocrates) of the 5th and 4th centuries, and the Epicureans (Epicurus, Leucippus) and some Peripatetics (Strato) from 4th-century BCE Greece into the 2nd-century CE Rome. Ancient Indian materialism emerged at the end of the Vedic era around the 6th century BCE with the Vaisheshik and Charvaka Schools and some currents of Buddhist thought extending roughly to the 4th-century CE Hindu restoration. Many of its early texts have not been preserved; rather materialist thought in ancient India has been reconstructed in part from responses to it in texts from other traditions, including later Brahmanic and Buddhist writings (see Bhattacharya, 2012; Chattopadhyaya & Gangopadhyaya, 1990; Roy, 1951). While the Greek and Indian philosophers are not identical even within their own schools in their descriptions of reality or speculations on the nature of the universe, they share ontological commitments to the existence of matter and nonexistence of spirit against prevailing religious authority and to the observation and study of natural phenomena as a basis for contemplation of the world. Their epistemological commitments include the perspectival nature of truth and the connection between the satisfaction of material need and both knowledge and ethics. Related but separate commitments that appear frequently in both contexts include realism and rationalism, though these are not exclusive to a materialist perspective.

Another common feature of materialism in antiquity is its speculative nature. For example, without the ability to observe the atomic (much less subatomic) constituents of matter, early Atomists could not provide significant empirical support for their descriptions of the nature of the universe but had instead to rely on speculation based on

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observation of the natural world. Developing as and alongside early physics and biology, materialism in philosophy could not exceed humans' capabilities for scientific investigation, such limitations characterizing materialist philosophy over its history. Yet the speculations of Greek and Indian materialists, however antiquated from the perspective of contemporary science, appear remarkably sophisticated as a foundation for later scientific inquiry.

In both Greece and India, the refusal by materialists of spiritual explanations of the world put them in direct opposition to contemporaneous ecclesiastic authority, just as the association of materialism with emerging mercantile interests placed materialism and its proponents into conflict with existing agricultural aristocratic authority. While in Greece these conflicts resulted in contests for power commonly associated with the birth of democracy, in India mercantile interests did not develop into a distinct social layer capable of challenging the priesthood or aristocracy for power. In both contexts, materialism fell out of favor with the emergence or restoration of aristocratic and/or religious power, specifically Christianity in the Roman Empire and Hinduism in India. Yet in Greece, religion was not the only idealism contending with materialism. An idealist metaphysics was developed by Socrates, refined by Plato, and continued through antiquity in the thought of Aristotle, the Stoics, and others, in opposition to materialist thought. Some materialists describe idealist metaphysics as an aristocratic reaction to the revolutionary perspective of the early materialists, a search for eternal absolutes against social strife and philosophical contingency (Lange & Thomas, 1829; Novack, 1965). Later in the West, Christianity as theology and as state administration would draw heavily from Platonism. And while Platonism in the West and Hinduism in India developed independently, the similarities both in their descriptions of reality and their prescriptions for ethical living support the suggestion by materialists that idealism (of which religion is a kind) emerged in alignment with ruling (agricultural, aristocratic, clerical) interests against other (mercantile, free urban worker, slave) social layers.

Materialists disagree about the thought of Aristotle, who has been described alternately as an idealist and as an important founding thinker of materialism. This is due in part to his holding on the one hand that matter is the cause of all that exists, distinct from its instantiation in form or knowability as essence, and on the other hand that matter as cause cannot account for itself but is only knowable in particular forms or generalizable as particular essences (Aristotle, 1948; Lee, 2016, p. 98). Thus in Lee's words, he "posits . . . a fundamental identity between what is thinkable and what is" such that the thought of reality stands in for or is more fundamental to its being than its materiality, a characteristic of idealist philosophy (p. 98; see also Adorno & Tiedemann [2001] on metaphysics).

Medieval and Early Modern Period

Following Hindu restoration in the 4th century CE in India and the establishment of Christianity as the state religion around the same time in the eastern Roman Empire (Byzantium), materialism all but disappeared from these areas for centuries. Materialism in philosophy and science continued to develop in the Islamic world from the 9th through 13th centuries, but these had little influence, at least in the West, until the Renaissance. Instead, Western philosophy was preoccupied with Judeo-Christian theology and the Scholastic tradition such that early modern philosophers, even those perceived as aligned with a materialist perspective such as Gassendi, Hobbes, and Spinoza, wrote in the idiom of or professed adherence to religion, even as their ideas presented possible challenges to religious dogma.³

The influence of idealism in materialist philosophy could be detected in other areas as well, notably in the conception of matter as essentially static and inert (*contra* some of the early materialists for whom movement was an essential property of all matter), while movement and change were conceived as properties of spirit, mind, *nous*, soul, or God. At the same time, both idealists and materialists presented challenges to religious thought such that rationalists such as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz and empiricists such as Bacon, Hobbes, and Locke—regardless of the extent to which they were explicitly committed to a materialist perspective—demonstrate affinities with materialism in this period, including determinism and the backgrounding of spiritual causality (Roy, 1951). These affinities present difficulties for distinguishing between rationalism and empiricism on one hand and materialism on the other. While they all presented challenges to religious doctrine in the 16th and 17th centuries, neither rationalism nor empiricism (nor the skepticism that either can inform) is unique to a materialist perspective.

There is debate about the figure of Spinoza who, like Aristotle before him, has been characterized alternately as an idealist and as a materialist whose thought in either case is important to the development of a materialist perspective. Spinoza is widely interpreted as presenting in his *Ethics* God or Nature (*Deus sive Natura*) as two aspects of a single self-causing Substance comprising the universe, with the terms God, Nature, and Substance taken as identical in reference (Spinoza, 1910). Spinoza under such an interpretation is, for idealists, the ultimate idealist for whom the universe and its causes exist only in God, while for materialists he is an arch-materialist for whom God dissolves as cause and deity in the material Substance that is Nature (Deborin, 1952; Roy, 1951).

Spinoza himself argues that interpreting him as saying “that God is one and the same as ‘Nature’ understood as a mass of corporeal matter . . . is a complete mistake” (Bennett, N.D.). At the same time, he says, “God is the indwelling cause of all things, not the cause from outside” and that “all things are in God and move in God” (Bennett, N.D.). He thus seems to posit God as the active principle in matter that, as stuff, is otherwise passive. This is in keeping with the understanding of matter in this period as inert, passive, and subject to external cause, which was held by idealists and materialists alike (see, e.g.,

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Toland's [1704] criticism of ancient and contemporary hylozoism, Cambridge Platonism, and Spinoza in Leask, 2013). However, he moves the God of external cause characteristic of Christian theology into matter such that God becomes both co-extant with the universe and its internal cause. While this avoids and refutes the dualism of Descartes, for whom thought and matter are distinct substances, it "displace[s] the dualism of substances to the dualism of attributes," where the essential attributes of Substance are extension and thought, rather than avoiding or refuting dualism altogether (Blunden, 2013, p. 91). That is, inasmuch as Substance is taken to be matter, Spinoza spiritualizes matter in a way consistent with idealist tendencies such as pantheism, vitalism, and hylozoism. Inasmuch as matter is taken rather to be of the two attributes of Substance, here extension, Spinoza relocates rather than resolves the dualism of matter and thought.

Ilyenkov (2009) offers a different materialist reading of Spinoza that resists the charge of his spiritualizing matter or relocating the dualism of matter and thought by describing their unity in the human (or other sentient) body as matter that thinks:

It is *in man* [sic] that Nature really performs, in a self-evident way, that very activity that we are accustomed to call "thinking." In man [sic], in the form of man [sic], in his [sic] person, *Nature itself* thinks, and not at all some special substance, source, or principle instilled into it from outside. In man [sic], therefore, Nature thinks *of itself*, becomes aware of *itself*, senses *itself*, acts on *itself*. (p. 18)

Spinoza did not merely wed "the purely mechanical and religious . . . ideas" prevailing in his time but instead saw that "religious, theological mysticism was the inevitable complement of a purely mechanistic . . . world outlook" and overcame the dualism of Cartesian thought by disclosing dualism as a false dilemma (p. 22). Such a reading of Spinoza, which Bakhurst (2015) calls "rather eccentric," resembling more the pragmatic thought of Dewey than Spinoza himself, does not denigrate either extension or thought but discloses thought as the life-activity of Nature itself in the activity of thinking beings, not in every extended part of Nature, as in hylozoism, but specifically in the activity of living humankind.

Thus, just as Aristotle can be described as a transitional figure between a prevailing materialist mindset in Greek antiquity and the triumph of idealism in philosophical and religious forms, Spinoza under many readings can be characterized as a transitional figure in the other direction, between medieval idealism (theology and Scholasticism) and the resurgence of materialism in modernity, whose rationalism looks to neither God nor matter for its warrant but Reason itself.

Modern Era and Enlightenment

If 17th-century philosophy saw a re-emergence of materialism in Western philosophy, it was in the 18th and 19th centuries that materialism took a stronger hold in philosophy, science, and politics. While in England the materialist thought of Hobbes and empiricism of Locke fell before the more conservative turn taken by the radical (and idealist) empiricism of Berkeley and empiricist skepticism of Hume, the former two thinkers were critical to the French materialism of the Encyclopedists and La Mettrie, among others (Lange & Thomas, 1829; Marx & Engels, 1975, 2010A). Yet French materialism continued more or less along the lines of a mechanistic understanding of causality and determination with which to this day it is often associated. The next important development of materialist thought, rather, was carried out in Germany within idealist philosophy, whose leading proponents were Kant—elaborated upon by Fichte and Schelling—and Hegel.⁴

Kant (1894) sought to bring the problems of thought together into a single system, drawing attention to the fact that any attempt to synthesize concepts into a perspective of transcendental logic discloses the contradictory nature or essence of concepts themselves. While his contribution was weighed down by the legacy of prior metaphysics in his rejection of contradiction or the privileging of one aspect of an antinomy over another as necessary for reason, it paves the way, through Hegel, for a materialism that rejects the mutually entailing reduction of thought to spirit and materiality to mechanism inherited from Descartes and opposed but not overcome by Spinoza. Hegel's contribution to later idealist thought is easy enough to trace. His contribution to materialist thought, however, still contested among later materialists, is his dialectic.

Fichte attempted to build on Kant's ambition of a single system of thought while avoiding his agnosticism and dualism by applying his laws of thinking to thinking itself (Ilyenkov, 2009). After him, Schelling would bring Fichte's dialectical insights further toward materialism by insisting that "a system of knowledge . . . must *embrace* reality not through a theoretical ability, but through a practical one, not through a perceptive ability, but through a *productive, realizing* one, not through *knowledge* but through *action*" (quoted in Ilyenkov, 2009, p. 80; see also Bowie, 2003). Both sought a unified system of knowledge free of the Kantian dualism that rendered the world unknowable in itself, but Fichte could only do so in the direction of a dualism of the thinking subject, and Schelling could only do so in the direction of a dualism of philosophical and all other thought, because their recognition of the inescapability of contradiction in conceptual thought was not accompanied with a means to describe it within the confines of Kant's logic.

Upon the systems of Kant, Fichte, and Schelling, Hegel sought to construct a logical system that could both recognize and describe the dialectical condition of unavoidable contradiction in conceptual thinking without dualism or narrowing philosophical inquiry to the restrictive domain of previous logic, which had no way to reconcile thinking about

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thinking with thinking about the world outside or independent of thought, much less to come to grips with thought as manifested objectively in human activity in the world that includes the mind. Rather than leave thought in the reduced domain of contemplation, Hegel divided thought and other concepts into three moments: the *universal*, or collective, represented conventionally in signs, tools, and artefacts, including language, which instantiate thought; the *particular*, situated in a specific social and historical context of relevant practice; and the *individual*, finite and concrete actions involved in instantiating thought (Hegel, 1910, 2009; see also Blunden, 2013). The contradictions that had confounded the old metaphysics and been brought into relief but not resolved by Kant and other idealists were demonstrated in Hegel to be commensurable with a unified science of thinking which, though idealist in its conclusions, became the dialectical ground for a materialist philosophy that could bring together what was the domain of thought proper and what was placed outside it by previous philosophical systems.

Dialectics was for Hegel a way of thinking “that included the process both of elucidating contradictions and of concretely resolving them in the corpus of a higher and more profound stage of rational understanding of the same object, on the way toward further investigation of the essence of the matter” (Ilyenkov, 2009, p. 110). Disclosing and resolving contradictions in logical concepts became feasible *within* logic only through a recognition of their moments, the sources of their particular determinations and the domains of their movement in human thinking and other activity.

Hegel’s examination of logic led in no small way to his giving thought itself a status akin to Spinoza’s Substance as the origin, cause, and ground of everything that can be thought or thought about. Materialists can appreciate his contribution to thinking about the world and about thinking itself by disclosing and resolving the dualist contraposition of active thought and inert matter without accepting its resolution in thought alone as having bridged the gulf in philosophy between thought and not-thought. While Feuerbach (Schuffenhauer, 1981) criticized Hegel for abolishing the contradiction of thought and being only within thought itself, Lenin (1976) described Hegel as closer to dialectical materialism as its inverted form than the French materialists and Feuerbach.

Among the pupils of Hegel, one of the first to attempt to unite Hegel’s logic with the long tradition of materialist philosophy was Feuerbach. Like Spinoza, Feuerbach resisted dualism by locating the unity of thought and matter in humankind. He reproached the idealists for continuing to separate mind from matter, or “incorporeal thought” against “flesh without thought” (Ilyenkov, 2009, p. 126). He criticized Hegel specifically for privileging thought as the active principle in the world, over nature, where all matter, including the embodied human, served as passive elements to be animated as if from outside. Yet, as with Spinoza, the human as matter that thinks remained in Feuerbach a passive element inasmuch as its activity upon the rest of nature is overlooked. Furthermore, Feuerbach stood the individual as the model the human in general, abstracted from the particular social relations that constitute it and in which it participates and stood the world given in individual contemplation as the world of both

nature and human social life. Thus Feuerbach's critique of Hegel's idealism repeated the privileging of thought even as he relocated that thought back inside the human mind.

Materialism in Marx and Engels

Marx and Engels attempted in much of their work to draw into conversation the competing concepts within Hegelian dialectics, and the long tradition of materialist thought from the pre-Socratics to 19th-century Europe, not only or primarily for philosophy but also and chiefly for understanding the world in order to act upon and change it. For them, previous materialisms, including Feuerbach's, were to be praised for resisting both dualism and spiritualism but were still unable to overcome the opposition of extended matter to thought without extension so long as they either applied the rules of thinking bequeathed by the old metaphysics and Kant to nature or accepted the mechanical materialists' reduction of thought and subjective human activity to the reflexes of matter. While neither Marx nor Engels made much of a programmatic statement of their approach as such, the terms "historical materialism" and "dialectical materialism" have come to describe it. The premises of their dialectical and materialist approach to both social and natural phenomena, which were also not apparently separate concerns to them, were less set out in treatise fashion than simultaneously worked out and carried out in their writings on particular concepts and phenomena. It is worth mentioning that there remains significant debate on the relationship of the two authors, the extent of their collaboration, and the mutual interpenetration of their particular ideas such as can or cannot warrant the assumption of a unified body of thought. For example, Althusser (1971, 1996) and Negri (1984) are among those who would separate the two and treat Marx as the authentic representative of this approach, while Lenin (1976) and Timpanaro (1976) are among those who see Engels' work as central to "Marxist" thought. Yet some works that come closest to describing rather than merely applying their world outlook are Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx & Engels, 2010B), Engels' (2010A) *Anti-Dühring* and *Dialectics of Nature* (Engels, 2010B), and the jointly written *The German Ideology* (Marx & Engels, 1975). The coining of the terms "historical materialism" and "dialectical materialism" and the systematization (not always faithful) of their approach fell to later theorists.

The distinction between historical and dialectical materialism in Marx and Engels, if one is to be made from their work and not from the perspective of developments in the philosophy and politics of the socialist movement later, lies perhaps in the application of dialectical thought to analyzing either sociohistorical or natural phenomena, respectively.⁵ If one takes seriously their commitment to the dialectical logic developed by Hegel, it makes sense to refuse a hard distinction, as they appear to seek a philosophy that ascertains the laws (in the descriptive rather than prescriptive sense) of development of both thought and nature over the course of the historical development of both.

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In Marx's earlier writings, he grapples with Hegel and his followers in order to describe how changes in thought (generalized into collectively held ideas as science/philosophy and as morality, law, custom) cannot be carried out solely in the domain of thought itself but must correspond with changes in the life-activity of real humans, including thought, in the course of their ongoing interactions with the natural world, including with other humans in social life. For him and Engels it is not individual or collective thought that precedes human activity but rather collective activity in the maintenance of collective life through acting in and on nonhuman nature that gives rise to human thought about itself and the world. It is precisely this collective activity in maintaining life that Marxists refer to as labor, not the particular form of labor in the production of commodities under capitalism to which the term is often reduced. Labor in this sense is the sum of subjective and objective, ideal and sensuous, human activity as part of nature on the rest of nature in the service of creating and re-creating the means of human existence in general and across periods of human history. It is how humans organize themselves and each other into this sustaining activity that results in the specific economic, cultural, and philosophical systems of a given epoch. Moreover, it is what results in the emergence of thinking about the world and about thought itself. Such a materialist perspective places matter and thought in a single category, worldly human activity, with the agent of thinking no longer philosophy's individual human in contemplation but the social human. This general human is social not only in the sense that individuals must collectively act for survival but also in the sense that in every moment of our species' historical development we act with the tools, artefacts, and knowledge inherited from those who came before us and use them to act within and on the rest of nature in accordance with our will and our needs.

To Marx and Engels, previous materialisms were insufficient to describe the relationship of thought and the world because they accepted the premise of their separation from each other and from the human life-activity that unified them. They thus committed the same error as the idealists in the opposite direction, namely to reduce the human to a passive element of nature, here acted upon mechanically by natural law rather than shaped by spirit or God or soul. This also reduced thought either to an epiphenomenon of physics, chemistry, and physiology and to the brain as the organ of thought, making the task of thought the discovery of the natural laws of which cultural laws were a distorted reflection. Where the idealists had either exaggerated the agency of the individual human through thought-directed action or subordinated it to an impersonal, spiritual agency, the "vulgar" materialists had either exaggerated the agency of the human as master rather than part of the rest of nature or subordinated it to an impersonal, though equally abstract, matter. In any case, such materialism could not but lead to either subjective (as in Schelling) or objective (as in Hegel) idealism (see Engels [2010C]; Marx & Engels [2010B]; and Ilyenkov [2009] for discussion of how dialectical materialism is distinct from nondialectical materialism and all idealism).

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A consistent materialist approach, then, needed to be dialectical in order to account for thought and the relation between thinking as the special activity of the human (or other sentient) mind and the extended world in which the mind exists and of which it is a part, for idealism could not explain the determination of thought by the social and natural world in which it occurs, and mechanical materialism could not explain the centrality of thought in human interaction with the rest of nature such that “ideal” or nonextended phenomena such as “function, reference, purpose, or value” made human activity in intercourse with nature distinct from that of other living, even sentient, organisms (Deacon, 2012, p. 2).

In later works, Marx applied this materialist perspective along the principles of dialectical thought to analyzing the particular arrangement of human collective activity of his time: capitalism. Engels, among other pursuits, applied this outlook to the socialist movement and to natural science. Their works over time are characterized by their process of thinking through the problems of philosophy and the problems of their time, including errors and re-thinking, correction and revision, such that later thinkers’ attempts to systematize, periodize, and standardize the perspective they developed into philosophy and doctrine would result in applications of what came to be called Marxism quite distinct from the work of Marx and Engels themselves. The particular political and intellectual uses to which their ideas have been put have also resulted in extraordinary disparity in understandings of their materialist method.

It is important to note that for their contributions to thought, Marx and Engels did not believe thinking on its own to be the purpose of their work. Rather, they developed their method in order to think about their world so that philosophy would cease to be a special science isolated by the social division of labor (manual from mental and the latter into special disciplines with professional thinkers as embodiments of ideas) and instead be a guide for and servant of purposeful human action in the world. As Engels (1883) says of Marx upon the latter’s death (and as may also apply to him):

[T]he man of science . . . was not even half the man. Science was for Marx a historically dynamic, revolutionary force. However great the joy with which he welcomed new discovery in some theoretical science whose practical application perhaps it was as yet quite impossible to envisage, he experienced quite another kind of joy when the discovery involved immediate revolutionary changes in industry, and in historical development in general. . . . For Marx was before all else a revolutionist. His real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions which it had brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat, which he was the first to make conscious of its own position and needs, conscious of the conditions of its emancipation. Fighting was his element. And he fought with a passion, a tenacity and a success such as few could rival.

Materialism After Marx and Engels

It was Lenin (1962, 1976) who, following Marx and Engels, developed their method both philosophically and in service to the revolutionary socialist project. He did so in debate with contemporary thinkers such as the empiricists Mach and Avenarius and the German social-democrat thinkers Bernstein and Kautsky, as well as earlier Russian socialists like Plekhanov. The reception of Lenin's work as well has been shaped by the official ideology of the Soviet Union and reactions to it within and outside the socialist movement, so that attempts to portray his writings as more or less faithful to the perspective developed by Marx and Engels already locates the interpreter within a particular orientation to the socialist movement.

Many scholars trace the development of doctrinaire dialectical materialism (abbreviated in the Russian term *diamat*) either to Lenin directly or to early Russian Marxists' (including Lenin's) interpretation of Engels' work as a codification or standardization of the method as invented and used by Marx (Althusser, 1971; Bakhurst, 1991; Bochenski, 1963A, 1963B; Paolucci, 2004; Van der Zweerde, 1997). Arguing against this characterization, Mareev (2008) notes that in spite of his deep engagement with materialist philosophy from the Greeks through Marx and Engels to his contemporaries, his use of the materialist dialectic in his other writings, and his political prominence, Lenin had very little lasting influence on the development of Soviet philosophy. Marxist thought came under the academic leadership of differing (from Lenin and each other) schools of Marxist thought until Stalin's (1942) advancement of his own version of dialectical materialism to the level of communist dogma (Smith, 1996). The competing heads of academic philosophy after 1917, those charged with the development of materialist philosophy along Marxist lines for the next decade, are most often described within two camps, the "Deborinists" or "dialecticians," and the "mechanists" or "Bolsheviks" (see Mareev [2008] for a critical description). The former, particularly Deborin, Lenin criticized as transforming the dialectic into a transcendent principle to be applied transcendentally, abstrusely, and formulaically to thought and the rest of the world, an error later materialists would place at Engels' feet. The latter, represented by Akselrod among others, stood in positivist and "vulgar" materialist thought characteristic of French materialism as criticized by Marx and Engels.

In 1938, Stalin's pamphlet *Dialectical and Historical Materialism* was published in the USSR, deciding both in print what had been established already in the regime's purging both the prevailing philosophical schools by 1931 Party edict. Stalin put forth an authoritative program of Marxist thought in the service of justifying the politics of the USSR and which all international Communist parties were obligated to take on as Europe fell into inter-imperialist rivalry first in World War II and then in the Cold War. It is at this time that the terms "dialectical materialism" and "historical materialism" were historically split, the first standing as the "general science of nature, history, and thought" that was "a natural science on the positivist model" and the second (abbreviated

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as *istmat*) being “bowdlerized into an evolutionism and economism,” both far from the materialist dialectic of Marx, Engels, and Lenin but claiming to be their truest representative in thought (Elliott, 2009, p. 68). All of science and philosophy in the USSR suffered being shackled to the interests of an increasingly authoritarian state. Beginning in the 1940s, the official policy of intellectual and cultural production was Zhdanovism, named after Stalin’s minister Andrei Zhdanov, a set of policies demanding adherence to Party doctrine in all works and harshly persecuting dissent. Even earlier the natural sciences fell under Lysenkoism, named after Trofim Lysenko, a set of policies hostile to evolution and genetics for their bourgeois and anthropological (versus communist and scientific) character. Lysenkoism led to the imprisonment of thousands of biologists and other scientists and, together with Zhdanovism, represented the subordination of all intellectual inquiry to the Communist Party under Stalin not only in Russia but all over the world until after Stalin’s death in 1953.

Because of the influence of the USSR on the further development of materialism worldwide, much of what passes as Marxist thought is precisely the antialectical, antihumanist, and positivist legacy of *diamat* as uncritically adopted and promulgated in top-down fashion by the entire Communist International throughout much of the Cold War. Due to heavy censorship and suppression of other currents of Marxist and materialist thought and political practice, the credibility the USSR earned in the fight against fascism in Europe, and the presence through the first half of the 20th century of mass Communist and Socialist parties in Europe and elsewhere, *diamat* was the entry point into and often the only available version of Marxist materialism available.

In opposition to *diamat* and the subordination of international parties to dictates from Moscow, Marxists outside the USSR were drawn to various alternative inflections of Marxist materialism. Socialist humanism (see Alderson & Spencer, 2017) developed in the United States and elsewhere, represented by Dunayevskaya and James, among others. Phenomenology and existentialism drew many European Marxists, like Merleau-Ponty and Sartre (see Elliott, 2009), while psychoanalysis attracted much of the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno and Horkheimer (2002). At the same time, many philosophers either abandoned Marxism altogether or remained within their countries’ Communist parties and attempted to theorize within the Party’s constraints.

Among the most notable of the latter in the ongoing development of materialist philosophy within and outside Marxism is Louis Althusser. From within the French Communist Party, Althusser (Elliott, 2009) criticized both Hegelian Marxism as idealist capitulation to bourgeois idealism and phenomenological and existential Marxism as unscientific and thus ideological (in the pejorative sense as mystification). The frequently changing winds from Moscow after Stalin’s death, the equally dogmatic process of “destalinization” under Khrushchev before its slowing and reversal, and the pursuit in most European parties of collaboration with bourgeois democracy may serve to explain Althusser’s apparent acceptance of the formulae of *diamat* as Marxist science or his

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attraction to the dogma of the Chinese Communist Party as it struggled against “revisionism” in the Soviet Union.

Althusser’s influence on the trajectory of Marxist and materialist thought and critical social theory in general from the 1960s onwards is difficult to underestimate, especially within the Marxist and broader leftist French intellectual milieu that included Derrida, Foucault, Lacan, and Deleuze, among others. Indeed, his ideas found an eager audience among critically oriented philosophers and other social thinkers in the United States through the work of other Continental theorists that arguably far outstripped the influence of his work during his lifetime.⁶ Given the impact of his work upon followers and critics alike in a variety of fields, any list of his most important concepts would be a matter of debate. Because he wrote in the transition between structuralist and poststructuralist critical thought and during a time of worldwide rebellion, his particular interpretation of Marxism and materialism shares a great deal with both broad tendencies.

While Althusser later resisted the structuralist label, claiming instead to have put forth a Spinozist reading of Marx (Althusser, 1976, p. 133), numerous scholars have located him firmly within at least a “most unusual” structuralism (Elliott, 2009; Stolze, 1998; Timpanaro, 1976, among others). Not only was his early writing well within the idiom of French structuralism and consistent with that broad tendency’s search for the invariant among particulars, the systemic among the spontaneous, or the necessary among accidents, but it was also focused on the very structure of capitalism, the scientific within Marxist thought, and the impersonality of social power as experienced by most. His concept of structural causality (see Thomas, 2002) and its attendant antihumanism and antiempiricism reduced the experience of individual human subjects to passive enactment of relations of production and nonscientific experience in everyday life to the domain of ideology (Anderson, 1976; Elliott, 2009). As French theory entered the linguistic turn, his concepts of subjectification (developed further in Foucault) and interpellation reinforced the absence of human agency and emphasized the human vulnerability to ruling-class ideology. This susceptibility required Marxism as a liberatory and unified materialist science to provide a path to the formation of alternative subject possibilities and agents among the masses under the guidance of the Party and its philosophers (Althusser, 1996, 2005). His rejection of economism, as the inevitable and transitive determination of social relations by the relations of production, led him to posit the relative autonomy of social relations and thought, as superstructure, from the economic base and describe intellectual activity as a process of production of ideas parallel to the processes of economic production. His interpretation of Spinoza and affinity with other premodern thinkers warranted his treatment of the ideal as an attribute of substance equal to the material. It resembled also, in its way, the objective idealism and downward thought-to-matter causality of Hegel except in reserving the determination of the superstructure by the base (a simple conception of which was characteristic of *diamat*) for “the last instance” (Althusser, 1996).

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Even a critical appraisal of Althusser can hold that, however far from the work of Marx, Engels, and Lenin except as read through the distorted lens of Soviet *diamat* and *istmat*, he was attempting to address and resolve real problems in the politics and philosophy of his time. Chief among these was the challenge of describing the emergence of thought and culture from the collective organization of social production under pressure from the politically instrumentalized and nondialectical Marxism of Communist parties from one side and increasing social unrest from the other. Another was to describe the apparent willingness with which rank-and-file Party members and the working class as a whole partook of bourgeois ideas and participated with little resistance in their own exploitation and oppression, and a third was to find a way to clear ideas that could serve equally powerfully as a basis for liberatory political practice. These questions remain pertinent to materialist thinking in general and socialist political projects in particular. Yet the level of abstraction at which he was compelled to work in order to remain in the Party made it difficult, if not impossible, to describe these social and economic relations in terms that resisted the continued professionalization of scientific thinking within the academy and its removal from the domain of agentive political activity among the masses themselves. It led him to an aleatory materialism whose focus on existing structure inhibited a developmental, historical analysis of thought and the world and whose resultant inability to explain how particular social and natural phenomena are determined complexly but not by chance alone. It also posited for materialism an alternative genealogy from Epicurus through Derrida that was

opposed, as a wholly different mode of thought, to the various materialisms on record, including that widely ascribed to Marx, Engels, and Lenin, which, like every other materialism in the rationalist tradition, is a materialism of necessity and teleology, that is to say, a transformed, disguised form of idealism.

(quoted in Lahtinen, Griffiths, & Köhl, 2011)

This is far from a thorough treatment of Althusser's impact on contemporary and later materialist and other critical theorists, who would largely reject his structuralism and schematism but retain his antihumanism and aleatory materialism. Foucault (1970, 2006; Rabinow, 1984) elaborated, both in a structuralist and poststructuralist idiom warranted partly by Althusser, on processes of subjectification and the development and activity of discourses governing human activity (see also Gutting, 2014). Deleuze, particularly in collaboration with Guattari, followed in Althusser's Spinozist footsteps in theorizing immanence, emphasizing the aleatory element in complex processes of natural and social development, and the task of philosophers as the creation of new concepts with the potential to escape the constraints of history and move thought in new, hopefully emancipatory, directions (Deleuze, 1988, 1992; Deleuze & Guattari, 1984, 1987, 1994). Critics of these late structuralist and early poststructuralist philosophers, particularly from a materialist perspective, have typically been located within Marxist thought.

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One perspective that was suppressed in the USSR and thus did not receive much attention outside the Soviet Union until recently is a line of “creative” Soviet philosophy tracing its roots to the Vygotsky Circle and Ilyenkov, among others, associated with iterations of Activity Theory (Blunden, 2012, 2013; Levant, 2012; Mareev, 2008). This perspective is close to the classical Marxist one in its dialectical and materialist commitments, specifically to the Marx and Engels of *Theses on Feuerbach* (Blunden, 2012). From this perspective, French materialism of the 1960s onward would appear as varieties of both subjective and objective idealism. Ilyenkov (1980, 2009), independently of developments in French theory, criticized the perspective of professional philosophers who generalized from their special place in the social division of labor their descriptions of the world of thought as if to the world including but not limited to thought. In his view, these philosophers failed to grasp not only the world of social life and nature but also a materialist sense of the ideal itself, which was neither opposed to matter nor autonomous from it. Their activity in the domain of symbols (which for him were material inasmuch as they were the embodiment of thought in artefacts, including language) disconnected from extended objects conventionally understood as material substitutes the verbal plane (language, symbols, institutions) for both the rest of the extended world and the ideal and thus transformed language and other symbolic artefacts into a fetish in a fashion similar to that of the Left Hegelians criticized by Marx and Engels:

This fetishization of language, and with it fetishization of the system of social relations that it represents, proves to be the inevitable end of any philosophy that does not understand that the ideal is engendered and reproduced only through social man's [sic] objective-practical activity, and that it also only exists in that process. In the opposite case some form of fetishization both of the external world and of symbolics develops.

(Ilyenkov, 2009, p. 160)

Language, as “the immediate actuality of thought” is “as little ideal as the neuro-physiological structure of the brain. It is only the form of expression of the ideal, its material-objective being,” while the ideal, that is thought itself, is the “subjective being” or form for the mind “of the object” external to mind, itself not material but instantiated materially in the psychophysiological activity of the thinking brain of the human in the course of acting in and on the rest of nature (Althusser, 1976, pp. 153-154).

From this perspective neither the subjective idealism characteristic of phenomenology and empiricism through the “linguistic” turn in structuralist and poststructuralist thought nor the objective idealism of downward (structural) causality and governmentality in the turn to “discourse” as power would have a claim to classical Marxist materialism. Rather it would echo the historic idealism that is the entailed and entailing opposite of vulgar or mechanical materialism, and for many of the same reasons as before. Inasmuch as Althusser's and his contemporaries' thought developed in the struggle between the vulgar and nondialectical Marxist materialism of official Soviet ideology and the

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analytical and often positivist thought prevailing in bourgeois society, it may not have easily developed otherwise.

Materialist thinkers after Althusser, Foucault, and Deleuze have distanced themselves from what they describe as excesses of the discursive turn in order to attend once more to the material (i.e., physical) world and its determining effects on thought and action. This broad tendency of “new materialism” moves away from most Marxist thought, which it describes as reductionist, representational, and totalizing in most iterations, save “new trends in nondogmatic (for example, autonomist) Marxism” (Coole & Frost, 2010, p. 28). This perspective on Marxism as materialism may be traced to new materialism’s origins in Althusser’s (2006) alternative “underground” genealogy of materialists from the ancients through Machiavelli, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Heidegger and its continuation in Althusser himself, Foucault, and Deleuze even as new materialists appear to vary on whether they are taking his opposition to *diamat* as standing in for Marxism writ large or responding to his own structural variety of Marxism.

New materialism is a broad tendency of thought within philosophy (Coole & Frost, 2010; DeLanda, 2010; Grosz, 2017; the latter is notable for a thorough treatment of Spinoza and Deleuze), feminist theory (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2002; Butler, 1993; Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012; Grosz, 1994, 2010, among others), sociology (Kirby, 2011, 2017), political theory (Bennett, 2010), and other disciplines, and its proponents are as varied in their commitments as the disciplines in which this tendency can be found. These can range from the pantheism, vitalism, and hylozoism associated with some interpretations of Spinoza to process ontological approaches drawn from Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze, among others, to interpretations of psychoanalysis. It often draws upon the insights of quantum physics, complexity theory, artificial intelligence, and cognitive science to explain uncertainty, relationality, and complexity in the ideal and natural world and describes social phenomena and thought in the language of these scientific perspectives. With varying levels of familiarity with or recourse to a Marxist materialism not distorted by Soviet positivism or structuralist abstraction, new materialists for the most part seek to understand and describe the same phenomena as dialectical materialism, namely the relation of thought to matter, mind to brain, cultural to social-material and natural, and philosophical to actual. Two important features distinguish it, however, from both classical Marxism and the later “creative” line of Soviet philosophy: theoretical antihumanism and aleatory materialism, which it draws from the Althusserian milieu that includes Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze.

In a search for the motive principle in nature and social life free of teleology, new materialists may posit Spinoza’s (and Hobbes’) *conatus*; desire from psychoanalysis; difference/*différance* from Derrida and Deleuze; versions of Nietzsche’s will-to-power; Driesch’s *entelechy* (modified from Aristotle’s term); *autopoeisis* as described by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991; see also Protevi, 2006, 2013) among others; or Foucauldian power. Absent from this tendency in materialist thought is purposeful human activity, including thought, in collaborative projects aimed at solving problems and fulfilling needs. Human existence appears here as the passive, objective, and unreflexive

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materialization of these material motive forces, which in most scientific thought are restricted to living organisms and their components along a continuum of sentience but in more vitalist or entelechical iterations may be extended to all matter. Such rejection of an anthropocentric perspective serves to ground an ethical argument, advanced by Bennett (2010):

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennable or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even “respect” (provided that the term be stretched beyond its Kantian sense). . . . My claims here are motivated by a self-interested or conative concern for human survival and happiness: I want to promote greener forms of human culture and more attentive encounters between people-materialities and thing-materialities. (loc. 83)

Given the hubris of humanism, particularly in its liberal Enlightenment iterations in service to capitalism and the Cartesian and Newtonian characterization of matter as inert and passive against the active principle of human intellect, such an ethical argument appears both reasonable and urgent. Yet where human agency, especially collective human agency, is elided, new materialism risks overlooking the specifically human role in solving the ecological, economic, and social problems resulting from our activity even as it rightly holds human activity responsible for these crises. Few clear solutions are apparent from this perspective beyond individual choices in how to live, and while revolutionary rupture remains possible within Deleuzian and new materialist theory the absence of notions of function, reference, purpose, or value as characteristics of socialized human activity, including thought, it is not clear how the desire for such a rupture is to be materialized in action. At the same time, new materialism’s emphasis on the intrinsic value (as dignity) of the rest of nature echoes Marxists’ insistence that human freedom can only result from our “existence in harmony with the laws of nature,” as thinking matter in a material world (Blunden, 2012; Engels, 2010A; Ilyenkov, 2009).

Materialism and the Critical Study of Communication

The first rhetoricians of Greece were materialists in the philosophical sense of basing contemplation on observation of the existing world, and often in the popular sense of being worldly and interested in acting in the world. Their public, sensuous, and naturalistic orientation to the power and uses of communication stood in opposition to the idealism of Plato. The situation appears to stand nearly in reverse in current

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communication scholarship. Though not generally Platonists, critical communication scholars largely debate about philosophical concepts in writing about the world and public life but, due to academic exigencies, are often inhibited from intervening directly in it as worldly communicators outside our professional activity. The social division of labor has alienated theory from practice, contemplative from sensuous activity, philosophy from its uses. In communication studies (as in most other disciplines), the separation of specializations and methods is such that even within our discipline we can be nearly mutually unintelligible across particular theoretical lineages. Not only are public and private, interpersonal and mass, internal (mental) and expressed, visual and verbal, and critical and establishment communication divided, even those working in a critical idiom may often speak past one another for failure in translating the terminology of one body of thought into that of another.

Such have been many of the debates about the material and ideal in the critical study of communication. Leaving aside the vulgar materialism associated with positivist and scientistic orientations, and necessarily omitting many relevant discussions in linguistics and philosophy, materialism in communication studies began with the incorporation of Marxist ideas into our theorizing and research, particularly in rhetoric. While the influence of Marxism can be found in Burke's invocation of "the masses," it was with McGee in 1982 (see McGee, 2009) that a materialist theory of rhetoric became a specific project for our field. Since McGee, and as the ideological turn (see Wander, 1983, 1984, among others) developed up to and through the turn of this century, the materialist current in critical communication studies has taken up debates over the nature of communication (especially ideology) and its role in shaping consciousness, communication as a tool for exercising or resisting (especially state) power, the role of the communicator (author, rhetor) and nature of the rhetorical situation, the creation of publics and communities in resistance. More recently, discussion has turned to the purviews of materialism itself and rhetoric itself and the relationship of the material to the ideal in communicative and other activity, with materialism until recently perceived as the domain of Marxism construed broadly.

Most of the discussions have fallen in line with particular theorists and theoretical-methodological orientations and lie very generally along three broad and imprecise lines of Marxist or materialist thought. While the descriptions of these lines is easily contested, they are intended to bring together theoretical lineage with area of work to describe critical perspectives on communication, particularly rhetoric, in relation to materialism. The first is classical Marxism, grounded in the work of Marx, Engels, and Lenin at minimum but often including thinkers like Lukacs, Trotsky, Gramsci, and others within the early Communist movement. Classical Marxism is associated with ideology critique, the formation of revolutionary consciousness, and the ideas of the traditional European and U.S. left. The second is Western Marxism, associated with cultural studies, media studies, literary criticism, and the ideas of the "new" left. As a description of a diverse and contradictory body of thought this category may be overly broad, as it contains such diverse theorists as Williams, Thompson, Hall, and Grossberg, among others who may overlap significantly with classical Marxism, alongside Laclau and Mouffe, Althusser, and

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Foucault (who overlap significantly with post-Marxism). Post-Marxism is associated with the discursive turn and poststructuralism broadly but extends into new materialism. Theorists in this vein, who represent a move away from traditional Marxism, however construed, include Derrida, Lacan, Foucault, Althusser, Deleuze, and others, including theorists within new materialism.

A classical Marxist orientation can be found before the wide reception of Althusser in our field either at the center of or weaved into the works inaugurating the ideological turn and focused on critical rhetoric (McGee, 2009, imprecisely; McKerrow, 1983, 1989, 1991; Wander, 1983, 1984). Later work holds a classically Marxist materialist perspective in opposition to much of the discursive turn by emphasizing the centrality of class as an ontological and epistemological category, an appeal to lived experience against the mystificatory power of ruling-class ideology, and the resistance of the real to the power of discourse (Aune, 1994; Artz, Macek, & Cloud, 2006; Cloud, Macek, & Aune, 2006, and elsewhere). An important example in rhetoric is Cloud's (1994) challenge versions of the "materiality of discourse" hypothesis that emphasized in variously idealist-materialist and idealist-relativist fashion the material effects in human consciousness and behavior of ideology (as mystification) and discourse (more broadly) over material determinations of consciousness and, more broadly, social life. Her particular Marxist orientation presents a realist materialist emphasis on the centrality of "lived experience" in the formation of consciousness and the origin in the economic "base" of ideological (juridical, moral, philosophical) discourse comprising the "superstructure" as a foundation for judgments about truth and falsity and class interests. Critics of this classically Marxist orientation include Greene (1998, 2004, 2006, 2009, 2015; Greene & Bost, 2011), Slack (2007, responded to in Cloud, 2008), among many others. They situate theories of truth and reality construction against the assumed simplicity of a representational theory of truth in Marxism, the constitutive power of discourse against the determination (partially or totally) of consciousness by the material organization of class society, and the instability of traditional foundations for judgment like class interests against material determinism and apparent essentialism in traditional conceptions of class and interests as well as truth and reality themselves.

Given relatively few widely read scholars in communication working explicitly within a classically Marxist materialist position, the polemics inherited from the socialist movement in enforcing and challenging the dominion of the USSR and its Communist parties, and the reduction of Marx's and Engels' dialectical materialist method to either *diamat* or reactions against it, it is difficult to piece together a fuller picture of classical Marxism as a resource for the critical study of communication out of its tangled history. Yet the influence of Marxism in communication scholarship and critical practice in general is evident in its ubiquity. The ideas of Marx and Engels figure in nearly every subsequent critical project, whether undertaken by their adherents or by their opponents.

Between classical Marxism and the turn away from Marxism is a diversity of engagements with materialist thought grouped together here under the label Western Marxism. While the diversity of ideas in such a broad tendency undermines such a

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categorization, the category is held together by the centrality of culture and thought beyond the narrow focus on labor and material (commodity) production as straightforwardly determining culture characteristic of *diamat* and *istmat* and mistakenly attributed to classical Marxism. Here can be included early cultural studies theorists attending to the interaction of class position, class consciousness, and culture explicitly identified as Marxist in orientation as well as the philosophical, literary, and rhetorical theorists of the linguistic turn from structuralism into poststructuralism. As such this group is on a continuum between traditional materialism/Marxism at one end and social constructionism and discourse theories of power at the other with many points between. On this continuum can be found work in the vein of Frankfurt School critical theory (see Bronner & Kellner, 1989), critical approaches to public sphere theory and counterpublics (e.g., Asen, 2015; Asen & Brouwer, 2001), a great deal of ideology critique and the study of popular and mass culture, as well as cultural studies as described earlier. Toward the discursive pole would be located structuralist and poststructuralist, discourse-centered approaches such as those that comprise a majority of critical scholarship in communication. Notable here, among many others, is the work of Laclau and Mouffe (2014), Biesecker (1989, 1992), and Greene (1998, 2009), particularly for their promulgation of the ideas of Althusser, Derrida, and Foucault within our field, as well as Lundberg (2009, 2012), and others who did the same for psychoanalysis.

Critics of the cultural turn in Western Marxism in our field are mostly to be found among rhetoricians located within or informed by varieties of classical or orthodox Marxism described earlier. They point to the relocation of revolutionary agency from a clearly understood class basis to other agents (identity communities, generations, multitudes, nomads, orator communists), the adoption of theoretical antihumanism, and a straw-person characterization of classical Marxism as material/economic determinism to ground adoption of a discursive determinism that would be its opposite. At or beyond the discursive pole is an abdication of materialism altogether and an embrace of subjective and objective idealism similar to earlier idealisms or nondialectical materialisms. Materialists characterize theory in the linguistic/discursive turn explicitly elides the material (as physical) where it in fact admits of its existence.

The broad critical tendency of post-Marxism, though not coinciding neatly with the move from structuralism to poststructuralism or from traditional to new materialism, is characterized by explicit questioning or rejection of Marxism as materialism alongside a rejection of a narrow focus on language or discourse attributed to the linguistic turn, as described earlier. In the critical study of communication, much of this work is associated with the lineage Althusser-Foucault-Deleuze and can be associated more or less closely with new materialism. This line is represented in our field by both sides of the current rhetoric and materialism discussion where “rhetorical materialism” is thought alongside and against “rhetoric’s materiality” (Biesecker & Lucaites, 2009) but no longer engages traditional materialism. Of note here are different theorizations of rhetoric as epistemology and/or ontology (where distinguished) (e.g., Stormer, 2016), object-oriented ontology and the rhetoric of things (e.g., Barnett & Boyle, 2016; Pflugfelder, 2015; the latter provides a particularly vitalist iteration), animal rhetorics (e.g., Davis, 2014;

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Hawhee, 2011, 2017; Keeling, 2017; Muckelbauer & Hawhee, 2000; Seegert, 2014), and other posthuman rhetorics (e.g., Gunn, 2014; Muckelbauer & Hawhee, 2000). Most of the essays in Biesecker and Lucaites (2009) are compatible with this broad tendency.

The development of materialism within post-Marxism, particularly among new materialists, has indicated a significant shift in our field away from the materialism associated with Marxism and modernity and draws from premodern and pre-Marxist concepts in postmodern iterations. Criticisms of new materialism in particular within a more traditionally materialist idiom as yet are few, partly because this area of the field is recently emerging and partly because discourse's materiality and matter's discursivity have largely been accepted against traditional materialism. Critiques can be gleaned from and built on the original dialectical materialist approach described earlier as well as debates within contemporary Marxist and other philosophy about Althusser, Deleuze, Spinoza, and other sources of this trend, many of which have been mentioned here.

For example, there remains the little explored line in Marxist dialectical materialism that shares topics of concern with new materialists and other broadly post-Marxist thinkers, such as emergence, complexity, and relationality in light of advances in natural science. Within natural science itself, Deacon (2012) arrives at conclusions very similar to those of the creative line of Soviet philosophy represented by Vygotsky (1978, 1987, 1997A, 1997B), Ilyenkov (1980, 2009), and others mentioned earlier in association with activity theory. Yet the critical study of communication has yet to develop this theoretical line in depth.

From the perspective of activity theory, communication scholars would do well to focus on the subjective-objective nature of thought and communication. They exist subjectively at once in the mind as thought and objectively as embodied in extended matter (including the sentient brain), in the artefacts, institutions, language, and other symbols created and accumulated over time that comprise the totality of human culture within the rest of nature. This approach is dialectical and refuses a dichotomy of corporeal matter and incorporeal thought. It is materialist in describing how matter both thinks in sentient organisms and objectifies thought through activity within nature. And it is humanist, not in a denial of the communicative capacity of nonhuman organisms or the affective capacity of other organisms and objects as constraints for human activity but in recognizing what is specific to human animals that enables us to affect the world in return as uniquely as we do through purposeful, goal-oriented activity beyond *conatus*, not least through rhetorical thought and practice upon one another in the creation and execution of our collaborative projects.⁷

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Notes:

(1.) Materialism can be considered a condition for the critical study of anything, as criticism is founded on the assumption of difference between appearance and reality, however construed.

(2.) Two limitations of this periodization include that it is not derived from pre-Marxist theorists themselves but from more or less contemporary historical categorizations and that it does not attend to different traditions of historical description associated with Buddhist and Hindu thought relevant to the Indian context described here. A more detailed historical description is outside the scope of this project and belongs instead to the history of philosophy.

(3.) For example, Lee (in agreement with Marx and Engels) sees a materialist in Duns Scotus, while Eagleton describes materialist commitments in Thomas Aquinas. Lange mentions the importance of Bacon, Descartes, Locke, and others to materialism, as do Marx and Engels, while the latter also associate these with idealism and vulgar materialism.

(4.) Leibniz deserves mention in any discussion of German idealism, though this author follows Ilyenkov in focusing on a particular trajectory of materialist thought through the other four philosophers.

(5.) In a 1954 lecture Ilyenkov and another Soviet philosopher are reported to have declared that “there is no ‘dialectical materialism’ or ‘historical materialism’ but only a materialist dialectic, understood as the logic of thought and action, and a materialist conception of history” (Mareev, 2008, pp. 7-8, translation mine).

(6.) Notably for the critical study of communication these include Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Ranciere, and Laclau and Mouffe.

(7.) “Collaborative” here means “collective” in general and does not refer to the nature of the collaboration, which ranges from forced/coercive to fully mutual. See Blunden (2016).

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